Luxury and transgression: the paradox of recycled product innovations. From the consumer's point of view to the brand's one.

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Abstract:

Luxury is always more transgressive. This trend even affects brand initiatives in sustainable development. The aim of this research is to examine both consumer and expert perceptions in the specific context of transgression linked to product innovations made from recycled materials. Two qualitative studies conducted among twenty-five luxury consumers and twenty-one luxury brand experts unexpectedly highlight the transgressive nature of this type of innovation. For consumers, it is the visual identification (or not) of the sustainable attribute that determines the rejection (or acceptance) of the product. Indeed, if the sustainable attribute is not visible, the innovation is perceived as a positive transgression that conveys values. However, if it is visible, the innovation is considered as a negative transgression harmful to the brand-consumer relationship. Finally, for experts, a sustainable product only makes sense if it is part of the brand's DNA and a global sustainable commitment.

1. Introduction

From New York to Paris, the last "Fashion Weeks" have shaking up the established codes of traditional luxury: Stella Mc Cartney presented her first fake fur made from corn residues, Balmain unveiled a new piece of jewellery made from synthetic diamonds and Marine Serre presented an apocalyptic fashion show called "Oil Spill". Luxury is always more transgressive. This trend particularly concerns the initiatives of luxury brands in terms of sustainable development: provocative communications, controversial actions, or singular distribution choices. It can even have a direct impact on the product through its design. Indeed, to protect themselves from reputational risk (Béji-Bécheur, 2014; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014) and to satisfy new customer requirements (Lochard & Murat, 2011), brands are implementing strategies that seem to contradict traditional luxury codes. However, consumers establish interpersonal relationships with brands (Fournier, 1998). These initiatives can then be perceived as unjustified and irresponsible acts on the part of the brand (Park & Kim, 2001), which can affect their relationships (Trump, 2014).

To our knowledge, only one research has examined luxury from the perspective of transgression (Hemonnet-Goujot, Kessous, & Magnoni, 2020). However, it is at the heart of the concerns of luxury brands, which must innovate while preserving their identity (Kapferer, 2016), and meeting the requirements of sustainable development (Béji-Bécheur, 2014). The aim of this exploratory research is twofold: (1) To fill a gap by contributing to a better understanding of the consumer relationship with luxury brands in the specific context of transgression; (2) To examine how transgression is instrumentalized by luxury brands, what is the objective, the target, and the benefits for the brands. More specifically, this research aims to confront the consumer's vision with that of the experts working for the most significant luxury brands (Dior, Saint Laurent, Prada, Gucci, Burberry, etc.). Particular attention is paid to alternative sustainable innovations as defined by Varadarajan (2017), and more particularly to innovations in luxury products made from recycled materials.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. The transgression of the relationship to the brand

The theoretical framework of consumer-brand relationship provided by Fournier (1988) argues that consumers relate to brands just as they relate to other individuals. They perceive the brand as a partner whose relationship is based on loyalty (Blackston, 2000). Based on the principle of reciprocity (Macneil, 1980), the quality of the relationship can be affected

according to the actions carried out by the partners: it can improve or be altered (Fournier, 1998). In the case of a transgression committed by one of the partners, this relationship can be particularly called into question (Buysse et al., 2000).

Etymologically speaking, "to transgress" means to exceed a limit or a prohibition. It suggests the existence of pre-established standards (Aggarwal, 2004). Specifically, transgressions refer to violations of the implicit or explicit rules that guide the relationship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). They provoke diverse consumer reactions that are closely related to the strength of the relationship (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000) and brand identification (Kim, Park, & Lee, 2019). From a managerial point of view, transgression attracts attention and promotes memorization of the benefits of the product (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003). However, transgressive communication can be negatively perceived and lead to rejection of the product or brand (Chan, Li, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2007). Consumer reaction can have a significant impact on the long-term value of the brand, so it is essential to understand these reactions (Sinha & Lu, 2016).

This is even more true for the luxury brand that rested on a sacred dimension (Kessous & Valette-Florence, 2019) and can inspire a deep bond with the consumer (Ko, Costello, & Taylor, 2019). Indeed, this relationship is based on pre-established codes, as defined by Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli (2014, p. 200) as *"the symbols of a given philosophy and lifestyle, a social status, quality and exclusivity of the products and services offered and historical heritage, along with a quest for authenticity"*. In line with this definition, we suggest that the concept of transgression, in the consumer-brand luxury relationship, could be defined as the transgression of one or more of these traditional luxury codes.

2.2. *The paradox between the notions of luxury and sustainable development*

While the definition of luxury remains very subjective (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2015), luxury brands nevertheless share characteristics such as rarity, quality, selectivity, and know-how (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). However, luxury brands must meet the requirements of a consumer who rallies to the cause of sustainable development (Janssen, Vanhamme, Lindgreen, & Lefebvre, 2013; Amatulli, De Angelis, Pino, & Guido, 2020).

The recent integration of sustainable issues in the luxury sector is a source of debate (Athwal, Wells, Carrigan, & Henninger, 2019). At the academic level, some authors identify proximity between the notions of luxury and sustainable development, based on the common values of quality, rarity, and sustainability (Kapferer, 2010; Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, & Behrens, 2013). On the contrary, other authors identify a dissonance between the two concepts

(Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014; Dekhili & Achabou, 2016). Indeed, luxury is associated with hedonism (De Barnier, Falcy, & Valette-Florence, 2012), excess and superfluity (Diemer, 2013). Therefore, it appears to be far removed from values linked to sustainability such as altruism and moderation (Widloecher & Querne, 2009). Furthermore, brands bring out the paradox of perceived quality by introducing recycled waste in their products (Dekhili & Achabou, 2016; Dekhili, Achabou, & Alharbi, 2018).

Faced with the apparent discrepancies between luxury and sustainable development, the launch of innovations of recycled products could therefore be considered as a transgression of the traditional codes of luxury. Thus, it could alter the consumer-brand relationship. Therefore, it seems relevant to better understand the consumer's perception by comparing it with that of luxury brand experts. Indeed, the goal is to examine what are the objectives and strategies of luxury brands and to analyse how far they can go in terms of transgression.

3. Method

Due to the lack of work on the subject, an exploratory qualitative methodology was favored. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both luxury consumers and luxury experts between July and September 2020. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face.

3.1. Qualitative study among luxury consumers

Twenty-five semi-directive interviews were conducted with luxury consumers. A "snowball" sample was constructed in accordance with the principle of diversity of socio-demographic profiles (Table 1). To be selected, the interviewees had to have bought and consumed at least two luxury items in the last twenty-four months in the following categories: ready-to-wear, fashion accessories, leather goods, shoes, watches, jewellery.

Consumer	Age	Gender	Job	Consumer	Age	Gender	Job
C1	24	F	Ph.D student	C14	27	F	Junior Buyer
C2	40	F	Consultant	C15	34	M	Marketing director
C3	57	F	Company director	C16	34	F	Doctor
C4	27	F	Category manager	C17	34	M	Marketing director
C5	32	F	Doctor	C18	44	M	Craftsman
C6	36	F	E-key account manager	C19	40	F	Marketing director
C7	35	F	Head of service	C20	43	F	Dietician
C8	42	F	Executive assistant	C21	37	M	Interior designer
C9	26	M	Product manager	C22	40	F	Lecturer
C10	51	F	Consultant	C23	46	M	Business manager
C11	25	M	Teacher	C24	25	F	Trainer
C12	40	M	Architect	C25	29	F	Merchandiser
C13	23	F	Ph.D student				

Table 1: Sample of consumers interviewed

3.2. Qualitative study among luxury experts

At the same time, twenty-one semi-directive interviews were conducted with luxury experts to compare their perceptions with those of consumers. The experts had to meet two criteria: (1) they hold strategic positions in marketing, communication, and retail, and (2) they work on luxury brands occupying significant positions in their categories (Table 2).

Expert	Brand(s)	Group	Position
E1	Van Cleef & Arpels	Richemont	Client Experience Manager
E2	Pomellato	Kering	Trade Marketing
E3	Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Tiffany & Co	Coty Luxury	Business Leader Ultra Premium
E4	Dolce & Gabbana	Shiseido	International Marketing Product Manager
E5	Giorgio Armani	L'Oréal Luxe	Director Retail Education
E6	Versace, Moshino, Sisley	Meiyume	International Key account manager
E7	Burberry, Gucci, Chloe & Marc Jacobs	Coty Luxury	Marketing and Communication Director
E8	Saint Louis	Hermès	Brand Director
E9	Dior	LVMH	Senior Area Manager
E10	Yves Saint Laurent	L'Oréal Luxe	International Development Marketing Manager
E11	Saint Laurent	Kering	Responsible for the ready-to-wear collection
E12	Cartier	Richemont	Creative Brand Content Group Manager
E13	Christian Lacroix, Rochas	Red Luxury Group	Marketing Manager
E14	Jean Paul Gaultier & Nina Ricci	Puig	Marketing and Communication Director
E15	Sisley	Sisley	Launch coordinator
E16	Lancome, Yves Saint Laurent &Armani	L'Oréal Luxe	Global Retail Excellence Director
E17	Valentino, Prada & Maison Margiela	L'Oréal Luxe	Marketing Director
E18	Journal Du Luxe / Salon Du Luxe	Journal Du Luxe	Consultant and Editorial Director
E19	Guerlain	LVMH	Category Manager Travel Retail Worldwide
E20	Chaumet	LVMH	Board of Directors
E21	Lancôme	L'Oréal Luxe	International Retail Education Director

Table 2: Sample of experts interviewed

3.3. Protocol of the two qualitative studies

The interviews were based on specific guides structured around seven themes from the literature review: (1) Non-respect of traditional luxury codes, (2) Feeling shocked, (3) The transgressive act, (4) Different types of brand initiatives, (5) Meaning of the transgression, (6) Consumer-luxury brand relationship and (7) Breach of the moral contract. The protocol of the studies is based both on broad questions and on projective technique through presentation of visuals representing brand initiatives (Theme 4). Concerning sustainable initiatives, two visuals of recycled products were presented: (1) A Prada bag made from reprocessed waste, therefore without visual impact of the sustainable attribute (Figure 1) and (2) A Vuitton bag made from recycled waste and assembled in the form of a patchwork, therefore with visual impact (Figure 2). With an average duration of 51 minutes for consumers and 49 minutes for experts, interviews were fully analyzed for lexical and thematic content using NVivo 12 software.

Prada will launch in 2021 a range of Re-Nylon bags made from plastic waste recovered from the oceans, fishing nets and textile fiber waste. This type of product will be sold at an expensive price, identical to that of other similar but non-recycled bags of the brand.

Louis Vuitton has launched the Urban Satchel bag made from recycled objects: cigarette packs, chewing gum wrappers, labels, old notes and water bottles made from patchwork. This bag is sold for 125,000 euros.

Figure 1:

Recycled product with no visual impact

Figure 2:

Recycled product with visual impact

4. Results

A thematic content analysis highlights both for most consumers and experts that the innovation of recycled products is perceived as a transgression of the luxury traditional codes. Three key elements stand out.

4.1. Without visual impact: a "positive" transgression that conveys values

Majority of consumers surveyed consider that the Prada bag made from recycled waste is an initiative that may be perceived as transgressive, but constitute a positive step forward: *"Here, I see the notion of transgression in a positive sense."* (C6). Indeed, consumers underline the innovative nature of this initiative. This product is made of recycled materials from rubbish, in contrast with the noble and rare materials characteristic of luxury products: *"Using rubbish for a luxury brand is a total break with the codes of luxury and for a good cause."* (C25). The analysis of interviews shows that the lack of visual differentiation between a recycled bag and a classic bag seems crucial. The recycled character of the product must not be aesthetically visible: *"It doesn't feel like a recycled bag. If they don't tell us, we can't guess it, so we keep the codes of a beautiful, well-made luxury bag, with know-how.*" (C4). Respondents highlight the brand's know-how in the waste transformation process : know-how makes it possible to obtain a quality product: *"It requires a lot of know-how to make a fishing net into a Prada bag that looks perfectly good and of high quality."* (C1). Beyond the functional and aesthetic aspect, some consumers perceive the purchase of this product as an act of strong commitment to

safeguarding the planet, a symbolic act carrying values: *"I would buy a commitment from the brand, behind values"* (C2). Majority of consumers perceive a positive impact of this type of innovation on brand image. However, two obstacles to purchasing were mentioned: (1) The design of the bag is considered too basic; (2) The choice of recycled material, nylon, is not perceived as noble. Finally, they find that the expensive price is justified by the cost of the waste transformation process: *"The material has to be transformed so the price is justified"*.

For majority of experts, beyond the transgressive aspect, it is a logical evolution of luxury brands in the face of environmental challenges: *"It's really the future of luxury, as a brand, you have a duty to influence in the right way"* (E10). Several of them consider that Prada's initiative is legitimate because it is consistent with the heritage and DNA of the brand: *"It is in perfect continuity of what they had done with nylon [...]and therefore coherence, consistency, legitimacy. It's not opportunistic.*" (E17). Finally, they underline that storytelling on this type of initiative is especially important: *"What will differentiate you is the soul you will give to your product [...] hence the importance of storytelling"* (E16).

4.2. With visual impact: a major "negative" transgression harmful to the brand-consumer relationship

Majority of consumers surveyed consider the Vuitton bag made of a patchwork of waste to be a *"shocking"* initiative in the negative sense. It can even lead to a rejection of the brand: *"It's not luxury [...] it's breaking the codes of luxury but downwards"* (C17). The non-transformation of waste and its raw appearance arouses extremely negative emotions: *"It's a vomit bag [...] You're not in recycling, you're in direct reuse."* (C12). Indeed, respondents consider that the brand breaks luxury codes in many aspects: (1) Quality, durability and know-how are questioned; (2) Beauty canons are not respected; (3) Regarding design, there is *"a lack of creative research"*; (4) The product does not fulfill its primary utilitarian function: *"It's not a bag"* (C19); (5) The price is not legitimate; (6) The dream dimension is scorned. Transgression of all these codes then leads most consumers to reject the bag as a luxury product and even to consider it as a work of art: *"I no longer associate it with a luxury product. That's where you fall into art. So, we're in other codes, we're in the artistic codes."* (C3).

Beyond the transgressive side, majority of professionals question the legitimacy of this initiative, associating it with a publicity stunt: *"It's a provocation, it's a transgression [...] it's really a publicity stunt"* (E5). They identify several risks associated with this approach: (1) The *"lack of desirability"* of the product; (2) The *"opportunistic"* nature of the approach which *"surfs a trend"*: *"For me, there is no story behind it. Except for wanting to make the buzz."*

(E16); (3) The lack of meaning: *"it's not worth it"*. To give consistency, they suggest that the amount of the bag be donated to an association: *"To be consistent, it may be necessary to give the money to associations that protect the environment."* (E7).

4.3. An Issue of Commitment and Meaning for Luxury Brands

Both consumers and professionals consider that luxury brands have a major *"societal role"* to play because *"fashion industry is one of the most polluting in the world"* (E9) and are followed by millions of consumers on social networks. Consumers express their expectation of a global sustainable commitment from luxury brands. Otherwise, there is a risk for the brand to be accused of *"greenwashing"*: *"If luxury brands really want to be eco-responsible, they should clean up their traditional production lines."* (C14). Globally, for experts, brands must *"respond to a need to give meaning"* (E16). Sustainable actions must be *"authentic"* and part of a *"long-term approach"*: *"it's a real long-term trend and luxury brands must take ownership of it, but always with meaning, with a real vision behind it, not just a one-shot deal."* (E14).

5. Discussion and conclusion

On a theoretical point of view, the results of this research reveal that luxury product innovation made from recycled materials is perceived as a transgression of traditional luxury codes for most consumers and experts. It appears that the visual identification (or not) of the sustainable attribute will define the rejection (or acceptance) of the product. Indeed, when waste is transformed and therefore not visible, the transgression is perceived as positive due to its innovative and value-bearing character. It may even strengthen their connection with the brand. However, when waste is visible, innovation is perceived as a major negative transgression that can jeopardize the consumer-brand relationship and even lead to the rejection of the product as a luxury product. This one appears to be a work of art. It represents the phenomenon of "artification" defined by Heinich and Shapiro (2012, p. 20) as the *"process of transforming non-art into art"*. In summary, most consumers and experts consider that luxury can be compatible with sustainability in line with previous works (Kapferer, 2010; Hennigs et al., 2013). Moreover, it appears that sustainable initiatives are even beneficial for brand image (Steinhart, Ayalon, & Puterman, 2013). However, the findings of this research contradict the results of previous research (Dekhili & Achabou, 2016; Dekhili et al., 2018) which highlight that use of sustainable substitutes negatively affects the perceived quality of luxury innovations. On the contrary, in our study, the quality of recycled innovations is not questioned. For consumers, the know-how of luxury brands enables the efficient transformation of waste and

guarantees the quality of the finished product. For professionals, to make sense, the recycled sustainable initiative must be part of a global brand commitment (Hennigs et al., 2013). In addition, it must be consistent with the brand's heritage and DNA. Otherwise, there is a risk that the initiative would be perceived only as an opportunistic action to create buzz. This then turns against the brand accused of greenwashing (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009).

From a managerial point of view, the results of this research lead to several recommendations. First, the analysis of the interviews suggests that consumers expect a recycled product innovation with a sophisticated design. As a result, brands can be creative and offer original products. Regarding the price, this investigation shows that products made from recycled materials can be positioned at an expensive price comparable to other classic brand products. Finally, this type of launch could be accompanied by a storytelling highlighting the exceptional quality and know-how of the brand in relation to its heritage. For example, Burberry has just released iconic models (including its famous trench coat and a collection of bags with the historic beige vintage check pattern) in recycled nylon made from plastic waste.

There are also limitations regarding this research, which are also future research avenues. For instance, it would be interesting to extend this study to other types of renewable substitution innovations, including those based on new materials (such as vegetable leather). Moreover, our analyse focuses on French consumers. Intercultural differences can lead to diverse expectations of relationships and interpretations of transgression. Finally, the investigation being exclusively qualitative in its very nature, the results have to be confirmed by means of a quantitative survey.

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